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A Loss for the CIA And for America

Customarily, when high-level government officials announce that they plan to resign, there is a flood of speculation about the causes of their disaffection.

The announcement by Admiral Bobby Inman that he would leave his post as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency was no exception. All sorts of reasons were suggested: He had had enough of government service and wanted to return to civilian life. He wasn't getting along with his boss, William Casey. He was angry at the White House national security staff for interfering in the formulation and execution of intelligence policy.

It's entirely possible that all these theories are true. Inman isn't saying just yet.

But one irritant that we suspect played a significant role in his decision was his unhappiness over the CIA's drift into the previously forbidden territory of domestic spying.

Inman is known to have opposed this role for the CIA, which was created as an overseas intelligence agency distinct from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose turf includes responsibility for domestic counter-intelligence activities.

If Inman is leaving the CIA because he couldn't win the battle to keep the agency out of the domestic spying business, he's not the only one who has lost; the entire country and its traditions of civil liberties have lost as well.

Inman is widely acknowledged to be one of the most competent and professional intelligence officials in the country, and the intelligence community will suffer by his absence. But his departure need not deprive the country entirely of his services. Once back in civilian life, he can speak out publicly about some of the things he knows better than almost anyone: the damaging effect of bureaucratic interference on intelligence gathering, and the danger of turning the CIA into an agency that spies on Americans.